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Book Review: Practical Theology: An Introduction by Richard R. Osmer and Studying Christian Spirituality by David Perrin

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Practical Theology: An Introduction. By Richard R. Osmer. Pp. x, 246, William B. Eerdmans, 2008.

Studying Christian Spirituality. By David Perrin, xii, 346, Routledge, 2007.

The future of Christianity is a concern at the heart of being and faith. In the passivity of encountering people's faces, dreams and hopes, we can be exposed to feelings of loneliness, failure, suffering, outrage and brokenness. And it is here, in the face of our neighbour, that we begin to appreciate the depth of the Church. The future of Christianity may remain secret, yet the extent to which we journey into another's life, offer a welcome and benediction of peace, gives hope to envision a messianic era and a future world of ethics, prayer and love. And it is in this desire and concern for the future of Christianity that Richard Osmer and David Perrin have each written books to awake our capacities for transcendence in the world.

Richard Osmer has entitled his book, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. However, it is much more than this. He has produced an extensive study of method in practical theology and pastoral leadership. Interlacing personal case stories of ministry and leadership with academic reflection on methodological approaches and theories, Osmer creates a fourfold vision of the tasks of practical theology. Today, in countries like the UK, US and Canada, particularly Protestant mainline Churches are facing competition from the 'Emerging Church Movement,' whereby parishioners possessing a solid theological education and feeling disillusioned with their own congregation, set out to found their own Church community. Representing almost the antithesis of such a movement, Osmer, an ordained Presbyterian minister and Professor of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary, has, like a surgeon giving a blood

transfusion, constructed a vision of practical theology to give life back to the body of the Church. To this end he envisions the four tasks of practical theological interpretation as: descriptive-empirical (priestly listening), interpretive (sagely wisdom), normative (prophetic discernment) and pragmatic (servant leadership). There is no doubt something 'systematic' as much as 'symptomatic' about this. Let us look at the play of words here. The systematic approach points to a need to understand and diagnose the environment of congregations. What appears 'symptomatic' is Osmer's stance to the raw reality of congregations struggling to achieve 'good practice'. For example, we hear Osmer lamenting in a personal example, 'Why had the congregation never taught its members how to resolve differences in the spirit of Christian love? Or, as I may put it today, why were there no practices of reconciliation present in the church?' (p.10)

In the face of problems ailing church congregations, there arises the temptation to lose interest in the meaning life and allow mundane concerns to take over. Do we then try to escape the mystery of life without seeing its beautiful, good and true face? Thinking otherwise, David Perrin's *Studying Christian Spirituality* provides a vision to meet the demands of the everyday with courage and confidence. Perrin, a Canadian Roman Catholic Priest and Professor of Theology, has found a way to present spirituality with the richness of the Catholic theological and philosophical tradition. For example, he reflects on our context of being 'in-between' modern and postmodern worlds. Our encounter of competing meta-narratives pushes us into a time of transition to search for deeper meaning in our identity and values. Perrin implies that the danger of a meta-narrative is one of totality, that is, when it contaminates personhood with fear, facts and thematisations. In terms of developing a spiritual ethic to the totalising force of meta-narratives that seek for example to displace the Judaeo-Christian story of salvation history, we may desire to ponder what might the churches

do to build up the faithful's religious imagination? In response, Perrin tells us that today personal choice has a priority over obligation. However, he remarks, 'Secularization may have produced an unchurched culture but not an irreligious one. People continue to experience something beyond themselves that they describe as the spiritual or transcendent dimension of life' (p. 83). So then, we are led to ask with Perrin and also Osmer, how might both the study of Christian spirituality and practical theology help us to understand and respond to the increasingly more secular state of being today?

The differing worlds of the secular and the sacred may also help us to appreciate why there is a chasm between the university and the parish itself. Whilst books are being written and scholarship undertaken, are theologians, by their creativity and hope, nevertheless still upholding these two worlds that seem to engage little with one another? This is an important question for theological institutes and colleges. Do we teach units in pastoral leadership and Christian spirituality beyond just a basic level? And further for the parish or congregation itself, given that people today are more and more educated and hungry to be nurtured by meaning and faith seeking understanding, how might prophetic discernment brewing in practical theology and Christian spirituality find a way to sustain and nourish people searching for meaning in the Church? Together, both Perrin and Osmer suggest a response to these questions. It has something to do with otherness and exploring the world of cross-disciplinary approaches.

For example, describing the normative task of prophetic discernment, Osmer shares a cultural experience in South Korea of discovering Korean food like bee bim bap, bulgogi and various types of kimchi, and visiting cultural centres and ending up in the famous Namdaemun market. Immersed in the new environment, Osmer finds something quite different to what he

had previously read in his guidebook. This something is a gift of otherness in the context of a vibrant culture overwhelming his senses. When people engage in a new culture with a sense of openness, what is impressed upon consciousness definitively is the existence of a different world of thinking and being. Where we realise this and accept it, the normative approach of theological interpretation, ethical reflection and good practice can reach a new level in addressing issues like the hiatus between the university and the parish, or the secular and the sacred.

Perrin also shares an example of a recent overseas trip. He journeys instead to Korea's neighbour, China. Rather than exciting, the experience is almost unsettling. The force of the state's ideology impact upon the ordinary life of the people seemed to rupture Perrin's consciousness. We see then that encountering otherness, whether positive like Osmer's experience or negative like Perrin's, are times for discernment to deepen and grow. The culture shock led Perrin to reflect that perhaps things are not so different in the west where consumerism instead of the state orders and controls our attention. Giving equally a normative transposition of this experience to theology, Perrin explains that our images of God can act in a similar detrimental fashion where we are compelled to exclude others. Do we then allow our 'secular' or egoistic perceptions to control our relation to God? Perrin implies that our own personal ideas can contaminate our image of God, the world and humanity. We may then wonder further how God's being permeates our natural or everyday reason.

Together, the works of Osmer and Perrin suggest that otherness is a gift. It allows our innermost being and judgment to take on a prophetic quality of having the courage to go beyond ourselves to new worlds. It is akin to learning from Christ in the paschal mystery. Thus in the vulnerability and weakness of learning and being open to new environments, a

hope remains where we can return gifted with passivity and a richer ability to listen and discern. In other words, when we try to bring spirituality and practical theology in conversation together, a hope is kindled to explore new sights, sounds, tastes and smells, and come away with a different and renewed mindset to face challenges binding and squeezing our modern and postmodern worlds. With one final note, Osmer's book in practical theology will be of great aid to postgraduate students whilst Perrin's work in Christian spirituality could even be used as a primary textbook or a guiding reference for undergraduates in theology.